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TAGS: PREL PGOV VE
SUBJECT: CHAVEZ WELCOMES NICARAGUAN PRESIDENT-ELECT ORTEGA AND THEN RESUMES HIS OWN INTERNATIONAL TRAVELS

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT DOWNES,
REASON 1.4(D)

¶1. (C) Summary. President Chavez received Nicaraguan President-Elect Daniel Ortega at Maiquetia International Airport December 5. Ortega is the first foreign leader to visit Venezuela after Chavez was re-elected December 3, albeit for a visit of less than 24 hours. In brief remarks to the press at the airport, Ortega and Chavez complimented each other on their respective electoral victories and expressed interest in enhancing cooperation between their two countries in unspecified areas. After securing close to 63 percent of the vote, Chavez appears ready and determined to resume his international activism. He departed Venezuela December 6 to visit Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia and Uruguay, and possibly Cuba. End Summary.

Chavez Greets Ortega

¶2. (U) President Chavez, accompanied by Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro and Defense Minister General Raul Isiais Baduel, met Nicaraguan President-Elect Daniel Ortega at 6:00 p.m., December 5, at Maiquetia International Airport, outside of Caracas. Ortega arrived on a Venezuelan state-oil company PDVSA plane and received a red carpet welcome. A relaxed Chavez, dressed in a red guayabera shirt, put his arm around Ortega and escorted him to a small crowd of reporters on the tarmac. Ortega told the gathered media that "The great victory of our dear Hugo Chavez is a triumph for the Venezuelan people and all Latin American people." Ortega added that he planned to discuss unspecified matters with Chavez as part of the "struggle for integration, for a spirit of solidarity, of justice, and real democracy."

¶3. (U) At the same brief press opportunity, Chavez lauded Ortega as "one of the liberators of Nicaragua from the Somoza tyranny." He also praised the "success" of Ortega's Sandinista revolution, despite the "war waged on it by the American government." Chavez added that "Here is Daniel Ortega, once again. Here is the Sandinista revolution, once again. Welcome. Nicaragua and Venezuela are united. Simon Bolivar and Augusto Cesar Sandino are united." Ortega was accompanied by his spouse, Rosario Murillo, and a technical commission ready to examine ways of enhancing cooperation between Nicaragua and Venezuela.

The Chavez Victory Tour

¶4. (U) After the National Electoral Council (CNE) officially declared Chavez re-elected in a December 5 press conference, President Chavez told the media that he plans to depart Venezuela December 6 for visits to Brazil, Argentina, and Bolivia. Chavez added that he may also meet with President Tabare in Uruguay, and he is reportedly slated to travel to Cuba as well (although BRV spokesmen have not mentioned a Cuba trip since Chavez' victory). Chavez met Brazilian President Lula de Silva on December 6 to review progress in the cooperative agreements between the two countries, especially cooperation between Petrobras and PDVSA.

¶5. (U) In the same press conference, Chavez said he will meet December 7 with Argentine President Kirchner to drink a "celebratory glass of good wine" and to discuss energy cooperation. Chavez also announced that he would not send Venezuelan Ambassador Roger Capella back to Buenos Aires. He confirmed that Kirchner had called him to convey concerns about Capella's interference in domestic affairs. Publicly praising Capella's work, Chavez nevertheless said he decided to recall Capella to spare Kirchner domestic criticism from the internal allies, the opposition, and the Argentine press.

¶6. (U) In addition, Chavez said he planned to attend the second Summit of the South American Community of Nations in Cochabamba, Bolivia and meet with "Evo" (President Morales). Chavez specifically mentioned his interest in discussing the Gas Pipeline of the South proposal with Presidents Lula da Silva, Kirchner, and Morales. At the same press conference, Chavez read for the press the text of Fidel Castro's apocryphal congratulatory note on Chavez' re-election and asserted that he could tell from Castro's signature that the Cuban leader is recuperating.

Comment

¶7. (C) Confronted by a surprisingly serious electoral challenge by Zulia Governor Manuel Rosales, President Chavez has had to focus domestically the last few months to secure his re-election to another six-year term. With a decisive electoral victory now behind him, Chavez is wasting no time jumping back into foreign policy. He is once again actively courting left-of-center governments in Latin America and reasserting himself as a regional leader. Despite Venezuela's failure to win a UN Security Council seat this fall, Chavez continues to profess an overarching foreign policy ambition to lead an anti-American axis. In his post-election balcony victory speech, Chavez once again railed against the United States "empire" and promised to make Venezuela a "world power."

WHITAKER